

# **A Blueprint for the Future of Migratory Birds**

**U.S. Department of the Interior  
Fish and Wildlife Service  
Migratory Bird Program**

**Draft Strategic Plan**

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## **U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Migratory Bird Program**

*“Propelled by an ancient faith deep within their genes, billions of birds hurdle the globe each season...They are not residents of any single place but of the whole, and their continued survival rests almost entirely within our hands.”*

– Scott Weidensaul, *Living on the Wind: Across the Hemisphere with Migratory Birds*

### **Introduction**

#### **Migratory Birds: A Federal Trust Resource**

The seasonal ebb and flow of migratory birds is one of the most complex and compelling dramas in the natural world. Driven by a genetic memory millions of years in the making, these animals embark twice each year on long-distance journeys between their breeding areas and wintering grounds. Their travels traverse states, landscapes, and oceans throughout the hemispheres linking the ecosystems, countries and peoples they visit. The conservation and management of animals capable of such impressive mobility require a strong Federal leadership to foster effective partnerships among the many nations, states, provinces, and organizations that are woven together by the flight paths of these remarkable species. Migratory birds are indeed international treasures that have been entrusted to our care.

#### **Birds for People**

Because of their ubiquitous and conspicuous presence, migratory birds symbolize America's wildlife experience. Birds enrich human lives in innumerable ways and the loss of bird populations would immeasurably diminish the quality of life for a large segment of the American public. Nearly 82 million residents of the United States (39 percent of the adult population) participate in wildlife-related activities, and 64 million of them pursue bird-related recreation, such as bird-watching, feeding, hunting, and photography. These citizens substantially contribute to local economies throughout the country by spending nearly \$40 billion annually on bird-related recreational pursuits. In addition, more than 80,000 subsistence hunters have a long and rich tradition and culture of harvesting birds in rural Alaska. Experiences range from an annual duck-hunting trip

to enjoying a chickadee at a backyard feeder to watching a pair of red-tailed hawks from a tractor seat.

### **The Challenges of Today**

Compared to a century ago, society today faces a more complex set of environmental problems that occur over the entire ranges of migratory birds. Habitat loss and degradation from a burgeoning human population and direct bird mortality attributable to a host of human-caused factors are redefining the challenges of migratory bird conservation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Declines in abundance of many landbird, shorebird, and waterbird populations, coupled with exponential growth of some goose populations, are indicative of ecosystems that have been highly altered. Reductions in habitat quantity and quality, the primary causes of negative population trends in many species, are exacerbated by the direct loss of bird life from an array of external environmental hazards. Despite the banning of DDT, which resulted from Rachel Carson's prudent warning of a "silent spring," pesticides and other contaminants continue to poison birds. Numerous other factors such as high predator populations, longline and gill-net fisheries, collisions with human-made structures, and disease outbreaks collectively cause significant migratory bird mortality.

### **Meeting the Challenges**

For more than a century, the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service), and its predecessors, has endeavored to achieve lasting conservation of migratory birds that has resulted, for example, in: the creation of the first National Wildlife Refuge, Pelican Island, as a haven for colonial waterbirds; the development of the longest standing broad-scale survey of animal abundance, the Aerial Breeding Waterfowl and Habitat Survey; and the administration of two premier continental partnership-based conservation efforts, the North American Waterfowl Management Plan and the North American Wetlands Conservation Act. Through these accomplishments the Service has left a legacy of leadership in migratory bird conservation. Despite past successes, the Service is challenged to meet the expectations of growing constituencies that often have conflicting demands and differing values or priorities for the conservation and management of migratory birds and their habitats.

To meet the increasing environmental challenges and on-going expectations of the American public for effective migratory bird conservation and management, the Service needs to develop a clear, well-defined blueprint. The purpose of this strategic plan is to provide general direction to the Service's Migratory Bird Program. To achieve this purpose, the Migratory Bird Program seeks the counsel and wisdom of all of its partners in developing this direction and sharing the vision of effective, integrated migratory bird conservation. Integration must occur across geographic scales, taxonomic groups, shared habitats, and human cultural experiences. Once a strategic framework is drafted, specific priority actions consistent with the framework can be developed to accomplish migratory bird conservation objectives.

## **Mission of the Service for Migratory Birds**

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has the legal mandate and the trust responsibility to maintain healthy migratory bird populations for the continued enjoyment of the American public. The Service is authorized by more than 25 primary conventions, treaties, and laws to ensure the conservation of more than 800 species of migratory birds and their habitats, of which many authorities extend beyond the borders of the United States. The Service works with many government, agencies, organizations, and individuals to meet these mandates.

## **Vision of the Migratory Bird Program**

*Migratory bird populations and their habitats are effectively conserved and managed, through sound science and diverse partnerships, at levels that recognize their ecological significance and provide continued opportunities for human use and enjoyment.*

## **Operating Principles**

Migratory bird conservation challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century will be surmounted only if the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Migratory Bird Program consistently adheres to principles of sound science and works with partners in a transparent and collaborative fashion.

### **Science**

The success of the Service and its partners depends on the acquisition and application of reliable scientific information as the foundation for the conservation and management of migratory bird populations. The Service must strengthen and expand its scientific tools of research, monitoring, and assessment to better understand how bird populations respond to environmental stressors, such as habitat fragmentation, alteration, and loss, and other human-induced changes, and to corrective actions implemented by the conservation community. Use of scientific information within an adaptive management context will enable the Service and its partners to make cost-effective management, policy, and regulatory decisions that meet migratory bird conservation goals and objectives.

### **Partnerships**

To achieve its migratory bird conservation goals and objectives, the Service must catalyze the formation of long-lived local, state, regional, national, and international partnerships. Because of the varied landscapes inhabited by migratory birds throughout their annual cycles and their movement across international borders, virtually all nations,

organizations, and individuals have an interest in or can influence migratory birds and their habitats. The Service must take a leadership role in coordination and communication among all stakeholders to implement the most comprehensive and cost-effective strategies to conserve and manage migratory birds.

## **Program Goals:**

To fulfill its many legal responsibilities for migratory bird conservation, the Service must expand both the breadth and depth of its Migratory Bird Program and attend to the full range of species in need of conservation.

To realize the Service's Mission and Vision, the Migratory Bird Program will focus its efforts on the following three goals:

1. Protect, restore, and manage migratory bird populations to maximize their ecological sustainability and socioeconomic benefits.
2. Protect, conserve, and restore migratory bird habitats to ensure long-term sustainability of all migratory bird populations.
3. Improve hunting, birdwatching, and other outdoor bird-related experiences and opportunities, and increase awareness of the value of migratory birds for their ecological, recreational and economic significance.

The specific objectives to meet these goals will be developed with input from our constituents and partners as we proceed with the development of this strategic plan and will be incorporated in the Department of the Interior's strategic planning process.

## **Implementation Strategies**

The Service's Vision and Program Goals will be accomplished by implementing strategies in the following four general areas of responsibility:

1. Population Monitoring, Assessment, and Management
2. Habitat Conservation
3. Permits and Regulations
4. Consultation, Cooperation, Communication, and Recreation

### **1. Population Monitoring, Assessment, and Management**

Information on the population status and trends of migratory bird species is required to comply with mandates in the various migratory bird treaties and other legislation (e.g., the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918 and the Fish and Wildlife Conservation Act of 1980). Monitoring information is also needed to evaluate the effects of management activities and to assess the impacts of other human and environmental factors on bird

demographics. Because most birds range over wide areas, an accurate assessment of status requires a range-wide perspective. Although state and federal agencies and non-governmental organizations conduct surveys that greatly contribute to our understanding of bird populations, the Service's Migratory Bird Program is responsible for providing a continental and international perspective to programs involving migratory bird assessment and management.

The Migratory Bird Program has come close to fulfilling this responsibility for some waterfowl, a group for which broad-scale monitoring programs have been in place for many years. However, information is insufficient for many other migratory birds, which results in the inability to reasonably predict the outcome of management activities. Impediments to the Service's ability to obtain comprehensive migratory bird status information include a lack of resources (staff and operational dollars) to implement and coordinate robust, sustainable range-wide surveys, and a need to develop or improve monitoring protocols necessary to assess migratory bird abundances and trends.

*Strategies:*

- Maintain and cooperate with existing operational survey activities (e.g., May breeding waterfowl survey, harvest surveys, U.S. Geological Survey Breeding Bird Survey) while continuing to improve their statistical design and implementation.
- Develop and implement statistically-rigorous surveys for species of poorly known status, Birds of Conservation Concern, and overabundant species.
- Increase capabilities for analytical support, including survey design, data storage and management, and analysis.
- Provide land managers with technical assistance in selecting and implementing appropriate bird survey techniques.
- Create a dynamic, user-friendly information and communication system to provide universal access to survey data.
- Facilitate periodic, independent evaluations of survey designs, operations, data management, analyses and reporting of survey and assessment information. Include critiques of data coverage and quality for all migratory bird populations.
- Support investigation of factors that contribute to changes in demographics of migratory birds, such as disease, predation, competition, and human-caused mortality.
- Evaluate impacts and effectiveness of management actions, and develop or

refine best management practices for migratory birds using an adaptive management framework.

- Determine and report on scale-appropriate status and trends of migratory birds, based on information derived from monitoring and research programs.
- Clarify the linkages between changes in habitat and environmental conditions and bird population dynamics.
- Identify and address critical information needs, emphasizing priority groups.
- Undertake conservation and management actions to achieve desired abundance levels or to reintroduce desired species. This includes providing technical assistance to Service field stations and partners.
- Develop and implement methods to reduce abundances of species that create economic and ecological damage and human health and safety concerns.
- Implement and improve surveys to measure subsistence harvest of migratory birds in Alaska.

## **2. Habitat Conservation**

Rangewide protection, restoration and enhancement of terrestrial and aquatic habitats and landscapes are crucial to maintain and conserve migratory birds. Since its inception, the Service has placed a premium on providing high quality habitats for migratory birds and traditionally the National Wildlife Refuge System has been the cornerstone of these efforts. The Migratory Bird Program also administers other initiatives, supported by accompanying legislation (e. g., the North American Wetlands Conservation Act, the Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Act, and the Migratory Bird Hunting and Conservation Stamp Act) that serve as catalysts for habitat conservation and management.

Despite the great successes of these and other habitat programs, many migratory bird habitats are still imperiled. The Migratory Bird Program needs to continue to develop regional, national and international partnerships with private landowners, corporations, conservation organizations, Tribes, and other Federal and state agencies that will lead to effective habitat management and conservation. Integral to this effort is the development of scientific tools to assess landscape condition. Increasing the technical assistance capabilities of the Migratory Bird Program will enhance the abilities of the Service and other partners to deliver the most productive migratory bird habitat on the continent.



*Strategies:*

- Work with partners rangewide to establish appropriate habitat conservation objectives for all migratory birds through existing bird conservation planning efforts.
- Develop biologically-based geospatial planning tools that integrate all migratory bird population and habitat objectives and facilitate large-scale, long-term habitat protection, restoration and enhancement for use by Joint Ventures, National Wildlife Refuges, and other domestic and international land managers.
- Protect, restore and manage priority bird habitats through the North American Wetlands Conservation Act, the Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Act, and the Migratory Bird Hunting and Conservation Stamp Act.
- Communicate migratory bird habitat requirements to other Service habitat programs (e. g., Refuge Ascertainment and Planning, Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program, Coastal Program, and Ecological Services Federal project review) to maximize the benefits these programs can provide to migratory birds.
- Provide technical assistance to Service field stations and partners on the most effective restoration and management practices for migratory bird habitats.
- Participate in promotion, delivery, and evaluation of non-Service Federal programs that have potential to increase the quantity and/or quality of migratory bird habitat (e.g., the Farm Bill's Conservation Reserve Program and Wetland Reserve Program).
- Work with partners to develop tools to track changes in migratory bird habitats across the entire range of these species and conduct periodic assessments of the state of these habitats. Conduct habitat monitoring where necessary to integrate with population monitoring at appropriate scales.

### **3. Permits and Regulations**

Under the authorities of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act and the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act, the Service regulates the take of migratory birds for hunting, depredation, scientific collection, religious, and other purposes. The regulation of take is a primary and traditional Service activity that uses monitoring and assessment information to

manage migratory bird populations. For example, various regulatory options for migratory game bird species are considered each year during a well-defined cycle of procedures and events that result in the rules that govern annual sport and subsistence harvest. For other direct take situations, the Migratory Bird Program issues thousands of permits to regulate numbers and species of birds taken. Requirements for each of the approximately 20 permit types vary according to the activity covered. Under the authorities of the Fish and Wildlife Coordination Act and the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, the Migratory Bird Program works with other Service programs in the review, consultation, and permitting process for Federal land management activities and for private activities requiring Federal permits.

Executive Order 13186 and increased enforcement of the take prohibitions will create additional workloads for the Migratory Bird Program. Timely responses are demanded by constituencies affected by regulations and permits. The Migratory Bird Program must expand its capacity to efficiently meet these increased demands. Overall, the Service's challenge is to balance the take of migratory birds with international, national and regional commitments to the conserve them.

*Strategies:*

- Improve and implement an objective, streamline process for establishing annual hunting regulations and strengthen the working relationships with Flyway Councils.
- Promote the use of Adaptive Harvest Management as an effective approach to managing migratory game bird harvests. This approach provides hunting opportunity consistent with established harvest objectives, while considering the status and long-term conservation of migratory game birds.
- Provide an effective forum for public review and comment during the development of hunting regulations.
- Work with the Service's Office of Law Enforcement to ensure compliance with the laws and conventions applicable to migratory birds.
- Work with the Alaska Migratory Bird Co-management Council to provide for regulated spring and summer subsistence harvest of migratory birds consistent with bird conservation goals, remaining cognizant of the desires of other stakeholders and user-groups.
- Implement a better process for the establishment of annual hunting regulations by Native American Tribes.
- Develop and implement biologically-sound permits, regulations, policies,

- and procedures to effectively manage and assess the take of migratory birds, while decreasing the administrative burden for permit applicants.
- Implement the recommendations in the Permits Workload Analysis.
- Develop Memoranda of Understanding with other Federal agencies to promote bird conservation under Executive Order 13186 through adoption of methods to reduce the impacts of significant unintentional take to avian populations.

#### **4. Consultation, Cooperation, Communication and Recreation**

Coordination of migratory bird conservation and management activities at international, national, and regional scales is essential to ensure an effective and efficient Migratory Bird Program. Habitat Joint Ventures formed under the North American Waterfowl Management Plan (NAWMP) are effective partnerships created to deliver the habitat needs of migratory birds in North America, whereas Species Joint Ventures focus international cooperation on biological and habitat questions for individual waterfowl species or populations. Similarly, Flyway Councils are Federal-State partnerships that address a variety of migratory bird management issues at the state, provincial, and flyway scale, including the development of hunting regulations. Overall, developing partnerships with and providing technical assistance to our international neighbors in Canada, Mexico, Central and South America, and the Caribbean and elsewhere will be key to conserving and managing migratory birds throughout their range.

The Migratory Bird Program serves as a focal point for the development and implementation of comprehensive migratory bird management plans. Those existing plans that are critical to the Migratory Bird Program include the NAWMP, Partners in Flight (PIF) Landbird Conservation Plans, the U. S. Shorebird Conservation Plan (USSCP), the North American Waterbird Conservation Plan (NAWCP), and migratory game bird management plans developed by the Flyway Councils. These plans have been developed by coalitions of Federal and state agencies, tribal entities, foreign governments, non-governmental organizations, industry, academia, and private individuals who are interested in the conservation of birds. Most recently, the Migratory Bird Program has supported the North American Bird Conservation Initiative (NABCI) in its effort to integrate all bird conservation plans through regionally-based, biologically-driven, landscape-oriented partnerships that deliver the full spectrum of bird conservation. NABCI has delineated Bird Conservation Regions, around which planning and implementation can occur. In addition, the Migratory Bird Program has supported bird conservation in Central America, South American and the Caribbean through the Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Act (NMBCA).

##### *Strategies:*

- Expand existing or create new Joint Ventures to encompass all migratory bird habitats in North America, and initiate, or strengthen similar

partnerships beyond North America.

- Facilitate the development, implementation, and evaluation of migratory bird conservation plans at appropriate scales, and provide support for conservation plan coordination.
- Strengthen rangewide management by improving international partnerships among Migratory Bird Treaty nations and other nations within flyways used by migratory birds.
- Assist other nations and U. S. partners in assessing status of migratory birds, identifying important habitats, and developing strategies to conserve shared resources through NMBCA grants and other programs.
- Develop products that promote the awareness of migratory birds and transmit the general messages of migratory bird conservation and management to a variety of audiences.
- Work with partner agencies and organizations through Federal project reviews and other means to infuse migratory bird conservation objectives into their project planning and implementation.
- Communicate the goals and functions of the Migratory Bird Program to other Service programs (especially Refuges, Ecological Services, and Private Lands) to increase their ability to meet responsibilities for migratory bird conservation.
- Promote and expand programs to increase awareness of the value of migratory birds and their associated habitats (e.g., Duck Stamp Program and International Migratory Bird Day)
- With partners, identify and promote appropriate recreational uses of migratory birds and improve the quality of outdoor recreational experiences related to migratory birds.
- Actively implement the provisions of the Refuge Improvement Act to improve the quantity and quality of migratory bird-related recreation on National Wildlife Refuge System lands, as compatible with refuge goals and authorizing legislation.
- Actively support state efforts to provide bird-related recreation through the Service's Grant in Aid programs.

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